Understanding and Accommodating Neurodiverse Students

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Neurodivergent is a broad, non-clinical term for “atypical” functioning of the brain—which encompasses a spectrum of disorders and learning disabilities (Baumer & Frueh, 2021). While this definition may seem sufficient and progressive at first glance, the language reinforces ablism by implying that a typical mode of functioning exists and uses a deficit-oriented lens to describe those who cannot conform to a socially constructed standard. I will be using the term *neurodivergent* to describe students who experience challenges in a classroom setting due to institutional barriers, emphasizing that the fault lies not with individual students but are the result of a systemic failure to accommodate all learners. Due to the media de-stigmatization and proliferation of mental health discourse, teachers are more aware of neurodiversity in the classroom and more willing to accommodate students—but that does not necessarily mean they understand the specific challenges or best practices (Devi et al., 2023). My paper explores how classroom teachers can honour the natural variation in ability among students through *universal design for learning* (UDL) and *differentiated instruction* (DI) frameworks, as well as why these strategies may be misunderstood and/or under-utilized in the classroom.

The Root of the Problem: A Flawed System

School boards seek to present themselves as a safe, inclusive, and fun space where students can learn, play, and build social relationships; unfortunately, students belonging to marginalized groups, including neurodiverse students, often have a less-than-ideal experience (Mcluckie et al., 2014). Many educational institutions in Canada continue to follow the Western model, imported by settler-colonizers and facilitated through schoolhouses constructed on stolen land. This educational model was not designed for *others*—those not fluent in the Queen’s English, disabled, queer, revolutionary, non-white, poor, or religious minorities—but for families who *could* prioritize reading, writing, arithmetic, and European history (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017). In an ever-diversifying Canada, such a model is blatantly inadequate and continues to be scrutinized in light of the barriers it creates for students with exceptionalities (Martin et al., 2019; Mcluckie et al., 2014). In this system, the implicit curriculum for neurodiverse students is that being "academic" is a fixed trait, lack of success is their fault, and their failure is inevitable. Measures have been taken to remodel our educational programs, primarily *equity, diversity, inclusivity, and decolonization* (EDID) frameworks, but there is a long way to go before we can achieve justice for our students, teachers, and families (Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017).

Re/framing Inclusivity

Classrooms are not personally curated gardens, where teachers have the right to pluck or prune anything they find undesirable. Instead, they should be regarded as fields of wildflowers: crabgrass, red clover, and dandelions all thrive alongside each other in a complex latticework of biodiversity, where each species benefits more from their co-existence than they would in a homogeneous setting. Teachers do not choose the students in their classrooms and may take to one of three main approaches: To appreciate the experiences each student brings and welcome the knowledge they will share, to coerce students to comply with the expected standard, or to

identify students failing to meet a standard and starve them of opportunities. For a teacher, this should be no choice at all—one factor which makes teaching such a challenging profession is the responsibility to act in their students' best interests and to help each student achieve their personal best. My personal philosophy is that the natural variation of ability and the diversity of individual human experiences are a great gift to society.

Decolonizing and Indigenizing Ability

We cannot discuss ableism in education without also discussing colonization—this is because *dis*-ability is an idea that was exported to North America along with settler-colonizers (Lovern, 2022; Sensoy & Diangelo, 2017). In a conversation-style article, Roberts (2022) recounted a conversation with Dr. Rheanna Robinson, which emphasized the necessity of understanding how colonialism has fostered ableism in Canada. An understanding of colonialism, ableism, and how they are entwined is a prerequisite in order to begin dismantling these forms of oppression: We cannot deconstruct colonialism without addressing ablism and vice versa. Lovern (2022) noted that most Indigenous cultures avoid a deficit-oriented approach to ability—simply acknowledging that all beings have strengths and limitations—the concept of *ability* is not anchored within a binary as it is in western scholarship. Robinson (2024), a confident, "disabled" Métis woman, said in her keynote address at University of Manitoba's Education Graduate Student Conference (EDGCS) that during her research with the Nisga'a Nation she learned that "There is no word for 'disability' [in the Nisga'a language] because that would mean the person has *no* ability and everyone has abilities."
Robinson (2024) has spoken at length about how this perspective helped heal her relationship with her own dis/ability; that changes in her mobility due to multiple sclerosis (MS) have not lessened her value as a human being and scholar because she will gain insight through her experiences, allowing her the privilege to share that knowledge (Roberts, 2022). Robinson's (2024) words and experiences resonate with me as a Métis person who was also diagnosed with several neurological/cognitive disabilities as a young adult (Roberts, 2022). I have had to learn that I am no less valuable or able than others because of my differences: something that has allowed me to accept this is an understanding that I hold a position of power, which allows me to share my knowledge and experience with others. It is important that, as educators, we instil in our students that differences in ability are not only to be tolerated, but honoured. In the next section, I will discuss a model which provides educators with a practical framework to integrate this ideology into the classroom.

"No Normal" Should Become the New Normal

The *Dots of Inclusion*, created by Moore (2016) is a visual representation which effectively illustrates different models of inclusion/exclusion, allowing the audience to better understand similarities and differences between approaches. In the introduction of her book, *One Without the Other*, Moore (2016), highlighted a common trap that she, along with many educators, fall into when discussing inclusion—when depicting inclusion, she had used many identical green dots to represent the "typical" students and different coloured dots to represent the "atypical" students, with their variety of exceptionalities. This way of thinking underscores an issue I highlighted regarding the definition which began my paper: inadvertently perpetuating the idea that classrooms are composed primarily of normal (typical) students, along with some others (atypical). Moore (2016) then remedies this by providing a model which she describes as a more

accurate representation of her inclusion philosophy: in this visual, each dot is a unique colour because all students are unique and will benefit from different environments/approaches (Moore, 2016). Canadian public education is under the jurisdiction of the provincial government, which requires them to have some means of tracing and method for standardizing the quality of education (Ontario Ministry of Education [OME], 2013). In the next section, I will highlight how these governing documents shape different approaches to accommodation in the classroom.

Individualized vs. Universal Accommodation

The Ontario Ministry of Education (OME) (2017), within the context of special education, defined accommodations as "special teaching and assessment strategies, human supports, and/or individualized equipment required by students with special education needs to enable them to learn and demonstrate learning" (G1), and clearly stated that it is distinct from modifications, which are used to alter grade-level expectations in one or more areas of curriculum (G5). In order to be qualify for individualized accommodations/modifications, by means of an individualized education plan (IEP) students must experience one of the following exceptionalities: behavioural, communicational, intellectual, or physical. Unlike many similar processes, the OME (2017) document clearly stated that "the determining factor for the provision of special education programs or services is not any specific diagnosed or undiagnosed medical condition, but rather the need of the individual student based on an individual assessment of strengths and needs" (A14). This document is intended as the primary resource for creating or updating a student's IEP, which highlights a student's strengths and challenges in the classroom/school environment, accommodations/modifications that student must be given, steps to better support the student/family and observe/document changes for any future IEPs (OME, 2017). I believe this document represents a step towards equity and accessibility in the sphere of special education, as it thoroughly documents the process and findings particular to the student, outlines the most relevant, tailored support for the student in order for them to be successful, removes the financial burden associated with obtaining a formal diagnosis, and facilitates the ability to keep students with exceptionalities in the classroom with their peers. While I believe that the IEP document is a great tool for students who require accessibility devices, personnel and/or active monitoring, it can be an arduous process to create and maintain them, as they are a living document designed to follow a student throughout their educational experience (OME, 2017). In many cases, students may see more benefit from attentive teachers, simple variation in classroom instruction, and flexibility in the creation of assignments, as I will explain in the next paragraph.

UDL and DI are the cornerstones of Canada's current accessible education policy: An approach where accommodations and flexibility are integrated into the classroom, meaning no student is singled out as "needing more help" than the "normal" students (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development [EECD], 2010; OME, 2013). The general idea is that teachers should use a variety of methods for instruction and assessment that respect the different learning styles in the classroom (OME, 2013). While my research and experiences are situated within the context of Ontario, I want to highlight a document from New Brunswick's Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (EECD) (2010), which clearly stated that teachers have the discretion to provide "universal" daily classroom accommodation(s) "to a full range of students, as per the universal design for learning framework" (p. 3). By contrast, the primary resource document for UDL and DI for teachers in Ontario is *Learning for All: A Guide to Effective Assessment and Instruction for All Students, Kindergarten to Grade 12* (OME, 2013)

which provides an overview and rationale for using UDL and DI frameworks in the classroom, best practices and strategies for classroom teachers, along with practical resources/templates is somewhat more vague about what teachers may, or may not, do in terms of accommodating all students (OME, 2013). My current understanding, as an emerging academic who is actively researching and understanding policy related to accommodation in classrooms, is that teachers may provide accommodations as part of UDL/DI so long as they (I) do not alter grade-level expectations or the grading system, (II) are available to all students, (III) maintain the fidelity of provincial testing, and (IV) cause no undue hardships for others in the classroom (EECD, 2010; OME, 2013).

Findings and Discussion

Most educators currently in full-time, classroom teaching positions are not actively reading the research publications in academic journals nor following the current academic discourse surrounding neurodiversity, ablism, and accommodation which has resulted in some level of uncertainty surrounding UDL and DI, leading to the under-accommodation of neurodiverse students in the classroom (Mcluckie et al., 2014; Moore, 2016). The current emphasis on UDL and DI in policy suggests that accommodations are mainly the responsibility of classroom teachers (EECD, 2010; OME, 2013). However, based on my teaching experience and literature review, many teachers currently in these classrooms positions still rely on the IEP system as the primary form of providing support to students who experience challenges in the classroom. It is my understanding the overuse of IEPs and underuse of UDL/DI strategies is (I) a lack of understanding in how to support neurodiverse students outside of standard academic interventions, and (II) a lack of clarity on what can be done *without* creating an IEP (Baumer & Frueh, 2021; Devi et al., 2023).

For example, during a teaching placement, I had a student (grade 5) who would not read during independent reading—the student read very fluently with a high level of comprehension, but during independent reading they would sit with the book open and just stare at the page. When I spoke to the classroom teacher, they were at a loss of what might help since the problem wasn't with their *ability* to read. In speaking to the student, they disclosed to me that it was anxiety-related, saying that it when it was too quiet, they would get lost in their thoughts about everything they had to do that day, then get caught up in the guilt of not staying on task, then the cycle would keep repeating. I mentioned that I have trouble with thoughts like that sometimes and that what helps me is quiet music because it helps me to stay in the moment. The teacher and I agreed to try playing calm piano during next period; I noted the student made some progress through their book and we chatted about what might happen next in their story. When I checked in with them the following week, they said the music was helpful and that they had started to listen to music at home as well. Some of the other students also mentioned to me and the classroom teacher that they appreciated the music: getting less distracted by sounds from the hallway, calming when they were they were getting frustrated, being less nervous about trying reading aloud to themselves/trying out new words, or simply enjoying the music because it sounded nice. For such a simple intervention, which made a huge difference to the "targeted" student, and benefited almost the whole class, why had the classroom teacher not thought of it—and why had I? As human beings, we tend to understand things best when we can identify with an experience or make explicit connections to prior knowledge (Siuty & Beneke, 2020). This often places neurodiverse students in a position where they have to effectively communicate their experience to a teacher who may or may not personally understand—this challenge is

exacerbated when the cause and effect are not readily apparent, such as anxiety/fixation and independent reading. In contrast, dyscalculia is a learning disability affecting an individual's ability to process number-based information—it is easier to understand how such a learning disability would affect a student's computational ability and it is likely that every teacher has someone in their immediate circle who struggled through math at some point (or they struggled themselves). Returning to the first example, while all teachers have felt nervous, they may be incredulous at the idea that taking the school bus home (a daily occurrence) or having to catch up on homework (one worksheet the student will complete easily), neither of which will occur for at least 4 hours, could make a student so anxious that they are essentially paralyzed, then feel guilty for being too anxious to stay on-task. A lack of common experience between the two parties made the classroom teacher in that experience less likely to recognize the challenge and less able to empathise with the student, let alone be prepared to offer a practical, relevant solution, whereas I was able to draw from my own experiences to provide something that may have been helpful. In the future, I plan to conduct research investigating how experiences of neurodivergent students in classes headed by neurodivergent teachers, vary from their experiences with neurotypical teachers.

In conclusion, neurodiverse students are those who are not "atypical" enough that the student requires an IEP or represents a disturbance to the class environment, but are those who are under-supported through accommodations (Devi et al., 2023). Vocal students who experience challenges in the classroom will receive an IEP and accommodations due to the disturbance they pose to other students, and so will a student with significant communication or learning disabilities due to the obvious challenges their "atypical" brain poses to their own education (OME, 2017). However, a student with attention deficit disorder (ADD) who generally follows classroom behavioural expectations and meets academic standards through an immense level of self-regulation, practice reading body language, cognitive-behavioural therapy, and extra reading at home with parents, may not receive an IEP because they appear to be "typical", leading the teacher to assume that nothing needs to be done on their part, even though making some simple changes to the classroom would reduce the amount of additional energy the student must expend in order to maintain that standard (Devi et al., 2023; Martin et al., 2019). In many cases, UDL/DI strategies are particularly beneficial to students because they acknowledge that academic challenges can result from challenges beyond academics, such as environmental or social factors that make it difficult to meet expectations that would not otherwise be a problem (Mcluckie et al., 2014).

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